

Sermon: Our Testimony

Reading: John 1: 19-28

Introduction

As a minister I often ask people to tell me their story of how they came to faith. I'm intrigued by life stories and the events which brought someone into fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Some have life transforming testimonies like that of St. Paul who had an encounter with the risen Christ, a blinding light on the Rd to Damascus so to speak. Others it's much more gentle and a slow warming of the heart. Do you have a testimony you share with others?

We must never think I don't have anything exciting to share in my life as my life is just ordinary. We must not think I don't have a testimony if my life was not living in a gangster's paradise filled with sex, drugs and debauchery, before I have something dramatic to share. The gangster type testimonies which spend 55 minutes speaking of the sinful life and then 5 minutes at the end which mentions Jesus are the types of testimony I am less impressed with. Personally speaking, I would much sooner listen to someone's testimony of why they chose to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, hearing how they are growing in faith and trusting God more and more in their life than ever before and listening to their gentle walk with Jesus, I could listen to such people speak about Jesus all day long.

What is your testimony? One mistake many can make when it comes to testimonies is they focus on their conversion. The testimony may well start like this, 'well when I was sixteen in 1954.....'

John Wesley once said if your testimony is more than two weeks old then it's too old. For our walk as Christians following Jesus should be challenging and generating faith filled experiences on a regular basis. There are times when we can speak of the old life we once lived and what happened to me in 1954, but if nothing else has happened since then I'm afraid you may well simply be living on the experience of your testimony and are not living in true faith experience. This is where many can be deceived. Just because someone had an encounter with Jesus which may have been dramatic does not mean they are still living in the ways of Jesus today. Scriptures are filled with people who started off well and became complacent and didn't realise how far they had fallen.

Hymenaeus, Alexander Demas and Philetus in the New Testament who all started off well, they may even have had great conversion testimonies to share but their lives did not produce fruit of the kingdom, they abandoned the truth and went the way of the world, following strange (ungodly) doctrines which brought about a shipwreck of their faith. Testimony is nothing without follow through.

Today's reading begins with John giving testimony as to who he is and what he is doing.

Context

The writer of the gospel of John who was a fisherman and brother of James who became disciples of Jesus provides us with an amazing array of statements concerning Jesus which are simply mind blowing.

John does not begin the account of Jesus at his birth in Bethlehem, speaking of a babe laid in a manger instead John starts much further back in history, in fact pre history! Before the heavens and earth were created is where John places the feet of Jesus. Read again what he says, 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the word was God' (**John 1:1**). John introduces us to the great doctrine of the Incarnation (made

flesh) writing, 'The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us' (**John 1:14**). Jesus is the centre piece of the whole gospel, not merely a teacher, rabbi or miracle worker but God incarnate. John's remarkable opening statement mirrors that of Genesis 1:1. There is no doubt or ambiguity over the identity of Jesus' divinity in the mind of John and in all of His writings in this beautifully composed gospel.

After John sets out the great doctrine of the Incarnation John then introduces us to the ministry of the fiery preacher and baptiser also known as John. This John was a cousin of Jesus and is more commonly known as the baptiser. Sadly we hear very little of John in our preaching these days and he only appears in the season of Advent. The rest of the year we hear very little else about him. The church offers a feast day of celebration for John the baptist which falls on 24th June each year, unfortunately this also goes largely unnoticed in many of our churches today.

Looking back

Why does John having introduced us to the great doctrinal themes of Trinity and Incarnation does John suddenly introduce us to Jesus' cousin?

Some 400 years before we discover a prophet was called by God called Malachi. This is an interesting book to read as so much seems to mirror much of the complacent attitudes we see today.

To spend a moment in the Old Testament with Malachi we discover the Jewish exiles who had been taken from their homeland and witnessed the destruction of their temple as they were taken to babylon as slaves.

In the days of Malachi we discover some of the exiles have returned back to the homeland and have been back about 100 years. The temple was rebuilt but on a much smaller scale than the original built by Solomon.

The temple was no longer glorious, the land was no longer yielding the fruits and harvests of plenty as the days of old and the people had become discouraged and disheartened. Their religious practices were mainly ritual, habit and half hearted at best.

Similar to today the people were asking

What is the minimum amount of time can we give to God for worship?

What is the minimum amount of money can we give to God?

What is the minimum we have to do to show we are God's people?

There was very little concern over how many attended worship or who attended service each week. Even worse the services had become so casual and half hearted it didn't matter how the service was conducted, anything would do, as long as it didn't go on too long!

Once the religious life began to slip into complacency, so soon followed morality. People begin to question why should they should bother with God, which led to the people stopped bothering to be godly.

Within the pages of Malachi we hear God speaking and responding to the complaints of the people. The complacency of the people led to God's silence and they would not hear God speak to them again for 400 years.

However God has not finished with His people for Malachi offers hope in these words.....

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come” says the LORD Almighty’
(Mal 3:1).

Both Matthew and John begin with a focus in their writings on this messenger who was long promised to be the forerunner of the Christ. Spotting the messenger of God after 400 of silence would be hard to miss. So both gospel writers Matthew and John introduce us to this messenger of God.

John leapt for joy

John himself was a miracle baby. Born to aged parents Elizabeth and Zechariah. Elizabeth was considered barren and past child bearing age when the angel Gabriel spoke to her about conceiving a son. I'm not sure who was the most shocked and surprised Elizabeth or her husband Zechariah, who happened to be the High Priest that year. For it was Zechariah who spent the next nine months of Elizabeth's pregnancy dumbstruck **(Luke 1:20).**

One of my favourite passages in Scripture is when Mary, herself three months pregnant goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. I always delight in this encounter of young Mary and older Elizabeth when they met for the Scriptures tell us when these two pregnant women met Elizabeth's baby leapt in her womb for joy. I think this is a simple and yet profound piece of Scripture. A child not 6 months old recognises the presence of God while in the womb. Life surely begins at conception and the baby, even as it is still growing is able to sense joyous emotion.

John's calling

John would not more be accepted in our culture today as he was in his own culture in the days of Jesus. His compassion on the lost sheep of Israel who were being misled rather than tenderly led by the false shepherds forced him to cry out against the religious leaders, calling them blind guides and a brood of vipers, venomous serpents doing the ancients serpents work and not the work of God.

Although John probably would last as long as he did in Jesus' day before being arrested and thrown in prison for his preaching, Jesus speaks highly of him saying,

‘Among those born of women there has not arisen a greater than John the Baptist’
(Matt 11:11),

declaring of John that he was

‘a burning and shining light’
(John 5:35).

Never do we see John in a state of pride but is always in a state of humility and reverence for God. John knew his calling was a great honour, preparing the way for the Messiah. How hard it is for us to want to be popular and crave popularity and the acclaim and praise of others. Yet we never see or hear anything like this from John, he truly was a humble man, pure in heart, keeping his eyes always on God and the task which God had given him to fulfil.

When John was approached by the religious leaders, the priests and Levites **(John 1:19)** John offers a testimony about himself. Not to make himself anything but declaring simply

that he is the herald long foretold and his call is to point to the one who is to come after him. I am here as

‘The voice of one crying in the desert, make straight the way for the Lord’

(John 1:23) referring to the prophecy in Isaiah **(Isa 40:3)**

and saying

I ‘baptise with water’ **(John 1:26)** - ‘But among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie’ **(Jn 1:27)**

The 400 years of long silence in Israel from hearing God’s messengers speak to the nation again are shattered. John breaks the silence with his weighty words and bold proclamation in the Jordan. His words would have been instantly recognisable by any Jewish person who heard them spoken recognising the implications of what was soon to follow. The King is coming and we have to get ourselves ready.

John makes no bold statement about himself nor does he consider himself special as set apart by God. What John does do is takes his calling very seriously and is passionate about the saving of souls. His message was simple, repent and be baptised. We prefer not to call people to repentance today and we tend to baptise infants instead of adults. Do you think we have got our messages to the world wrong in our day? We baptise babies and often never see the parents again. We justify it by saying its our tradition to do so, its a way of reaching out with our message and its a way of showing God’s love inviting them into the family - Really!!

John would be calling the parents to repentance and for them to be baptised, turning back to the Lord.

John’s mission is no different to ours, each of us are called by God who own the name Christian and our lives are to do two things,

1. Bring glory to God, raising Jesus higher and higher in our lives as he is King
2. We are to prepare the way for others to come to know God for themselves.

We may not feel called to stand in a river and preaching a message of repentance but we are called to make disciples of all nations and this means sharing with others the testimony of Jesus’ gospel and lead them in faith to the cross of Jesus in repentance and baptism.

(Matt 28)

Summary

I wonder if many people in the church actually like John or refer to John the baptist as one of their favourite people in the Scriptures? Jesus certainly did. John was not a compromising preacher. He knew his King and Lord. Once he had spent time in the presence of heavens King there was no way he would ever be intimidated by earths governors or kings. Maybe if I spent more time with my Lord and King I would be less intimidated by what others had to say about me?

An old preacher once said,

‘God is on the lookout today for a man who will be quiet enough to get a message from Him, brave enough to preach it, and honest enough to live it’ (V. Havner). These words describe John the Baptist for he was indeed fearless preacher who challenged priests and kings with the message from God.

John knew his ministry was short lived. He was aware for Jesus to increase John would have to decrease and move aside to let the King be seen. May we never compromise the doctrines of faith, forever stay in close union with our King and have wisdom to know when our lives are getting in the way and step aside to let God’s work be done. **Amen.**